Using personality type in the business communication classroom

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Abstract

Students, faculty, and, most importantly, employers, have for years recognized the need for improved communication skills. The business communication curriculum is filled with a variety of topics that lead to improved communication skills. Some of these topics, a percentage of students find boring, unimportant, intimidating, and/or nonessential. Other students find these topics to be interesting, significant, challenging, and vital. For example, oral presentations have been found to be a major fear of today's college student. Could the preference or the abhorrence of various business communication topics be related to personality type? To answer this question, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), combined with a Likert Scale, was used to study the relationship between business communication students' personality types and their preferred topics in business communications.

Introduction

Students, faculty, and most importantly, employers have for years recognized the need for improved communication skills (Wedell and Allerheiligen, 1991). The business communication curriculum is filled with a variety of topics that lead to improved communication skills. Some of these topics, a percentage of students find boring, unimportant, intimidating and/or nonessential, while other students find these topics to be interesting, significant, challenging, and vital. For example, today's college students find oral presentations to be frightening. Could the preference or the abhorrence of various business communication topics be related to personality type? Measuring an individual's personality dispositions and preferences, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of the most popular and widely used personality measurement instruments. It is designed to identify the personality preferences of an individual along four dichotomous indices. In addition, many researchers (Bowman 1990, Heimlich, 1990; Luh, 1990; and Myers and McCaulley 1989) have supported the application of the MBTI to a variety of educational settings (elementary, secondary, post secondary and higher education institutions) and to a variety of variables (adult learners, learning style, student achievement, and instructional methods).

This research study focused on the personality types of business communication students (BCSs) and their preferences for particular various business communication topics. Certain other related factors were also considered. The following research question was addressed: Do the personality types of business communications students, as they relate to preferred business communications topics, differ? The following primary null hypothesis guided the study:

H0. There will be no tested differences between the personality types among BCSs and their preferences for particular business communication topics.

H1. Tested differences among the various personality types of BCSs will result in differences in their preferences for particular business communication topics.

In summary, Jung's theory of psychological type, identified through the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) ® developed by Myers and Briggs (1975), is an appropriate theoretical framework for research to determine the classification of personality types among BCSs. Therefore, Jung's theory and the utilization of the MBTI, combined with a Likert Scale, are appropriate means of studying the

relationship between subjects' personality types and their preferred business communication topics.

Instrumentation

Two research instruments were utilized for the collection of data in this study. First, Form G of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was administered to determine the personality type of the BCSs in the study. Second, a Likert Scale was developed to determine the preferred business communication topics of BCSs. Personality type and preferences for particular topics in business communications were obtained from this typical undergraduate population. The collection of data was accomplished through the use of the survey method based on Dillman's Total Design Method (1978).

Using Dillman's TDM will help to minimize the problems of response quality and quantity. In other words, "...this is nothing more than the identification of each and every aspect of the survey process that may affect response quantity or quality and shaping them in a way that may encourage a good response" (p.2). Each of the potential participants received a survey packet containing a cover letter describing the study to the potential participant and an outline of the procedures to be followed in completing the forms in the survey packet, the MBTI and the Likert Scale. In order to preserve the confidentiality of all survey respondents, each packet was not coded, this increases participation in many cases as suggested by Dillman, 1978.

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personality types of business communication students (BCSs) and their preferences for particular various business communication topics. The subjects in this study represented those students enrolled in Business and Interpersonal Communications at Indiana University of Pennsylvania who completed the background survey plus the MBTI and the Likert Scale. One hundred and ninety-nine students completed all the required materials.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) A complete frequency distribution of the personality types of individuals participating in this study is provided in Table 1. The most popular personality type was the ESTJ, (extraverted, sensing, thinking, perception) with 27 students or 13.6%.
See issue's website <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/fal02.htm>

Likert Scale Subjects were asked to indicate their preferences toward a particular business communication topic. Twelve topics were ranked valuable by nearly 50% of the population. Eight topics were ranked least valuable by 25% or less of the population. The frequency distribution and percentages are listed in Table 2.
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Business Communication Topics Students rated the forty-nine topics on a scale from valuable to worthless. Table 2 indicates the top 12 topics that BCSs ranked as most valuable. Table 3 indicates the topics that were ranked by 25% or less of the population as least valuable. See <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/fal02.htm>

Findings Related to Primary Hypothesis

The primary hypothesis, H0, stated there will be no tested differences between the personality types among BCSs and their preferences for particular business communication topics. Alternately, hypothesis one, H1, stated that tested differences among the various personality types of BCSs will result in differences in their preferences for particular business communication topics. The relationship between

personality types among BCSs and their preferences for particular business communication topics was determined not to be significant. When performing the ANOVA procedure between personality types and preferences for each business communication topic, none were found to be significant. Not a single topic proved to have a statistically significant relationship with the independent variable of MBTI personality type. Therefore, given that there were no tested differences as predicted in Hypothesis 0 (H0), the null hypothesis was, accordingly, accepted. Conversely, Hypothesis 1 (H1), which theorized tested differences among the groups was rejected.

Conclusions relating to Personality Type and Business Communication Topics

Among BCSs, no tested differences were found between their personality types and their preferences for business communication topics so Hypothesis 0 (H1), is accepted. While some of the demographic and personality data collected as part of this primary hypothesis support findings reported in the professional literature, the actual relationship between personality type and preferences for business communications topics preferences directly contrast with much of the research literature. Regarding the actual distribution of personality type, it was found that the ESTJs (Extroverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging) was the most prevalent personality type among BCSs. Twenty-seven or 13.6% of BCSs registered this personality category. ISTJ (Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging), ESFJs (Extroverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judging) and ISFJs (Introverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judging) constituted the next largest groups at 10.1%, 9.5%, and 9%, respectively.

The personality type of ESTJ was the most frequently reported personality type. This personality type could have influenced the rankings of business communication topics. There appears to be a trend between the ESTJ personality type and the topics considered most valuable by BCSs. ESTJs like activities that are concrete and have present-day usefulness. They are assertive, analytical, systematic, and fact-minded practical organizers. They like systematic structure, are practical, realistic, and have a natural head for business. The topics that were ranked most valuable by study participants included many topics from the employment unit of business communications. Resumes, cover letters, and job search skills are very practical, real-life activities. ESTJs would enjoy working with these activities. These activities were ranked valuable by all BCSs, but they are particularly favored by ESTJ BCSs.

The ISTJ personality type was the next largest group reported at 10.1% of BCSs. ISTJs are described as analytical managers of facts and details; dependable, conservative, systematic and decisive. Having introverted sensing as their strongest mental process, they are at their best when charged with organizing and maintaining data and material important to others and themselves. The employment unit in business communication offers much material and data that is particularly useful in ISTJs' present life. The business communication topics rated as valuable would be appealing to ISTJs. Activities such as effectively interpreting, organizing, gathering, planning and presenting report information would be most enjoyed by the ISTJ BCSs. The ESFJ personality type was reported by 9.5% of BCSs. These practical harmonizers like to work with people, are sociable, orderly, conscientious, realistic and well tuned to the here and now. They have a concrete, present-day view of life. The business communication topics ranked valuable would be enjoyed by ESFJs. Topics such as interpersonal communication, customer communication, and employee communication the ESFJ would welcome and relish.

The ISFJ personality type was reported by 9% of BCSs. Similar to ISTJ they are described as managers of facts and details; they are systematic, and concerned with

details. Having introverted sensing as their strongest mental process, they are at their best when using their sensible intelligence and practical skills in tangible ways. The relationship between the valuable business communication topics and this personality type is echoed once again. Job applications, job searches, employee and customer communication are activities which allow ISFJs to function using their natural inclinations. In addition, personality type and choice of major were consistent with the literature. Marketing majors were mainly composed of ESFJ and ESTJ. The findings are consistent with the findings of Waner and Echternacht, 1993, and McPherson, 1994. Accounting majors were mainly composed of ISTJ and ISFJ.

According to the theoretical framework of Carl Jung (1989) that formed the basis of this study, every person has a natural preference for either extraversion or introversion. Jung further provided a prototype scheme of personality preferences among which could be based extensive explanations of why normal individuals perceive and respond to information and/or situations differently. Therefore, based on a review of the literature (Lawrence and DeNovellis, 1974; Myers and McCaulley, 1989) it was hypothesized that the BCSs studied were, in fact, likely to demonstrate preferences for business communication topics based on Jung's personality type scheme. However, this was demonstrated not to be the case. The relationship between personality types among BCSs and their preferences for business communication topics was determined not to be statistically significant at the .05 decision level.

Implications for Business Communication Educators

The underlying assumption of this study was that BCSs' personality type was a significant determinant in their preferences for business communication topics. The findings gave little credence to this assumption. However, the results of this investigation suggest that those who are interested in understanding BCSs' personality types and their attitudes towards business communication topics can benefit from understanding these variables. An appreciation and understanding of student personality types and preferences for topics in business communications will aid the current business educator in such areas as career counseling and student self-assessment. Although no absolute exists, it appears that within undergraduate business communication programs knowledge of student personality type could be a useful tool in directing the future employment and future training of students. For example, certain personality types cluster into particular professions (i.e. Marketing personnel have high degrees of ESTJs and ESFJs; accounting personnel cluster around ISTJs and ISFJs). Information on an undergraduate's MBTI personality type might well serve as an effective counseling tool. Although students should never be discouraged from entering a particular field of business solely on the basis of personality type, it is an advantage to all concerned to have a better understanding, in advance, of the nature of the career and the professionals with whom they would be working.

In this particular study, ESTJs, ISTJs, ESFJs and ISFJs made up nearly 42% of the total population of BCSs. Having student personality type information available will enable the instructor to understand why certain topics are deemed valuable by students. If a class is made up of BCSs students with "S" sensing as their dominant mental process, activities that are realistic, practical, concrete, and useful will receive a great deal of attention and interest in students. Information, such as personality type, can provide insights to develop instruction that will provide meaningful activities for particular personality types. Although one can not satisfy all the students in a class, at least attempts are being made to present material that is receptive many students.

Additionally, given that certain business communication topics were found to be valuable by BCSs, it is important for business communication educators to use this information when developing planning units and lesson plans. Specific business communication topics were found to be preferred among BCSs, and business communication faculty should consider emphasizing these topics. Topics such as resumes and covers letters, employee communication, employment skills, and job search skills need to be given greater prominence within business communication curricula. One can certainly see why these topics received high ratings. The employment unit is very practical and real for BCSs. They see a direct value from studying these topics (i.e. preparing a resume, writing a cover letter, and interviewing for a job).

In looking at the topics that were deemed worthless, it is interesting to note that many of these activities are theoretical. Topics such as principles of communication theory, the communication revolution, and power politics are not practical and very abstract. Information presented earlier about the personality types and preferences of the ESTJs, ISTJs, ESFJs, and ISFJs would lead one to see that these topics would not be appealing to nearly 40% of the BCSs studied. Personality type information can aid an instructor to find out what are preferred activities and what situations are appealing to various personality types. Once that information is secured, an instructor can present content and activities in a variety of ways. This should maximize the amount of learning.

Information on BCSs preferences for business communication topics may be helpful when planning and organizing the semester. If it appears that BCSs are experiencing difficulty or boredom or are viewing the topics as not valuable, faculty members need to show how these topics are relevant and spend quality time on these topics to get student's interest.

The results the MBTI will provide students with an overview of their particular personality type. This information can be used as a counseling tool when deciding on careers or finding about what personality types cluster around specific careers. Knowledge of personality type could further BCSs in understanding their own natural personality types and their preferences for business communication topics. This added insight may cause them to become more cognizant as to why certain topics seem "more interesting" than others.

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